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Why I Write, What I Write, How I Write

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Panel: Why I Write

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Marjorie Evasco

I. Why I Write

On occasions like this when I am asked to talk about my poetics the image of the Great Heron standing in the mudflats comes to mind. It is an image that brings me back to a long bus ride I once took with my parents from Tagbilaran City to the town of Ubay to visit my grandparents for the summer vacation. I hated those bus rides because invariably, too many people were crushed together, and under the seats were all sorts of odds and ends-- potatoes, bananas, dried fish, corn grits and chickens tied at the feet to be sold at a public market in some town. There were fewer buses in Bohol then and when the one we took blew one of its tires, it meant a tedious wait in the middle of nowhere while the driver walked to the nearest vulcanizing shop.

I was a hungry, hot-tempered and testy 10-yr. old from the heat and dust when our bus stopped in San Pascual, a barrio 25 kms. from our destination. But my father hoisted me down from the seat, brushed the white lime dust from my hair, and led me up a hill where the cogon grass swayed to a pungent breeze. From this lookout point, the rice in the paddies were ready for harvesting.

“Watch,” my father instructed, pointing to a pond where two carabaos were cooling off. Suddenly, my father clapped his hands, and as if by magic, a flock of white birds flew out of the water behind the clump of cogon grass. The birds circled and took my heart with them as they flew away.

“Herons,” my father named them. They were perfect in flight, and as the child I was, I must have associated beauty with motion. I must also have associated magic with the way the hands can call forth things, and the way names can fix in memory a moment of transient wonder.

Many summers hence, far from my family and away from the island of Bohol, I began to learn the language of flight, dream and memory I now call poetry.

II. What I Write

My first book of poems called “Dreamweavers” is a book of origins. It took form in 1987 after ten years of work and its themes touch upon the creative concept of the “Mata” or “Eye” motif found in traditional Asian handwoven fabrics. In the Cordilleras, north of the Philippines, the eye motif also conveys the concept of keys, locks, openings, closures.

In an associative leap of the imagination, these concepts relate to the sense of an integrating Self.

Another creative concept that informs the first collection comes from Phillipine history. At the point of colonial impact, the Spanish chroniclers described the Visayans pintados/pintadas-- the tattooed people. Markings on the body were only for men and women who had done deeds of valor or created beautiful things useful to the life of the community.

The second book called “Ochre Tones” took longer to complete -- 12 years, and I call it a book of changes anchored upon the primary elements of earth, water, fire and air. It is in this book where I undertook to reclaim my mother tongue through translation from English to Cebuano-Visayan. Needless to say, the decision to write in Cebuano and become a bilingual writer is a political and artistic choice in the context of postcolonial acts of language.

III. How I Write

Drafts of poems are telltale signs of the work I do to shape the material at hand in order to give it its best possible hearing. I can never truly say how I write because a large part of the process remains wondrous. One necessarily resorts to reconstructions of the process, something called “memory’s fictions” by Filipino poet-novelist Bienvenido N. Santos.

I know only this: that the materials of the imagination are taken from the haphazard paddies of dreams and memories, and that each poem feeds on whatever it needs. The rich loam of time and space, lived outside and inside the self nurture the-creative process. And the poem’s making is a way of focusing this inner sight, to let something new come alive with sound, movement, taste, texture and shape, bringing us back to things as they were when we named them for the first time.

I believe that once a poem is written, the poet can become invisible again until the next urging to sing the rattlesnake, grasshopper, centipede, cow dung or buddha. For the making of a poem is an eccentric act of faith that both the conjured up thing and the living presence of the world will someday awaken in another person’s body of memories and dreams.